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## *The Belt and Road Initiative and Pacific Island Countries*

Matthieu Grandpierron <sup>1,2,\*</sup>  and Feiyang Yu <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Catholic University of Vendée, La Roche-sur-Yon 85000, France

<sup>2</sup> École Polytechnique, Palaiseau 91120, France

<sup>3</sup> Research Center for Pacific Island Country Studies, Liaocheng University, Liaocheng 252000, China

\* Correspondence: m-grandpierron@ices.fr

*Lei Yu and Sophia Sui (eds.), China's "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI) in the Pacific Island Countries (PICs): Geo-economic and Political Implications for China-PICs Relations, Peter Lang Verlag, 2025, ISBN 9783034354295 hb, 9783034354301 ebk*

The book investigates an ambitious and ongoing development project of the 21st century: China's infrastructural, economic and diplomatic expansion into the Pacific through its flagship foreign policy project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [1]. Drawing on geo-economic analysis, political science and international relations (IR) theory, Lei Yu and Sophia Sui present a focused study of China's engagement with Pacific Island countries (PICs), arguing that BRI in the Pacific is far more than an infrastructure financing program. It is a multi-layered endeavor with economic, political and strategic implications that are deepening China-PICs relations and reshaping the regional order and power dynamics. The book enters a rapidly evolving literature on the BRI which has, until recently, concentrated on Eurasian land corridors, African infrastructure and debt and Southeast Asian port and rail development. The authors turn attention to the Pacific Islands, which are overlooked in strategic studies [2]. The authors invite readers to consider how small states navigate great-power politics, economic dependency and

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development priorities in an era of intensified global competition [3]. The major strength of the book is that it engages on the topic of PICs and BRI from multiple angles, thereby giving readers a holistic understanding of an understudied but fascinating topic [4].

Methodologically, the book combines the authors' strong field research and investigations with interviews conducted across multiple PICs. This first dataset is then cross-checked and compared with a second dataset composed of interviews and perspectives from Chinese scholars, entrepreneurs and volunteer medical professionals who are currently working, or have previously worked, in the Pacific Islands. The use of first-hand qualitative data provides valuable insights into how China–PICs relations are understood, negotiated and experienced by different stakeholders. Unlike overly deterministic accounts that portray the BRI either as a straightforward instrument of imperial expansion or, conversely, as a form of benign development cooperation, this book advances a more nuanced and original analytical framework. Central to this framework is the recognition that Pacific states are strategic actors with clearly defined national interests. The book demonstrates how PIC governments selectively engage with China's BRI to maximize development gains, strengthen bargaining power and reinforce their sovereignty and self-determination.

Yu and Sui begin by situating the BRI within broader debates on China's rise. They reject framing the BRI solely as economic diplomacy or altruistic development cooperation; instead, they argue that in the Pacific context the BRI projects are both economic and political tools, which extend China's economic reach while also securing strategic footholds and political influence within a region historically dominated by Western powers. This framing reflects an increasingly common interpretation in BRI scholarship: that infrastructure and financing are inseparable from geopolitical strategy.

The authors devote significant attention to the political dimensions of China-Pacific relations in the BRI context, showing how some Pacific states have shifted diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, thus providing a convincing demonstration of how politics, development, and status connect intersect. The authors also show the complexity of development choices for PICs and their need to balance among China, the US, Australia and New Zealand, and European states to reduce overdependence. At the same time, despite their modest size and resources, PICs are courted by major powers, including China, for the institutional support they can provide in international and regional organizations [5].

While the primary focus of the book remains centered on geo-economic and political dimensions, the authors also look at PICs-China relations from a security lens. The authors show the impact of the 2006 civil unrest in the Solomon Islands and how it revealed vulnerabilities and weaknesses in the existing systems to protect overseas Chinese in the region. Showing the process that started from the 2006 riots to the new measures enacted by China to protect its diaspora helps understanding these policies better. Amid intensifying US–China rivalry, proper contextualization is essential to prevent

overinterpretation. From a Western, uncontextualized vantage point, what appears to be an expansionist maneuver is in fact a reactive strategy aimed at mitigating overseas risks.

Another interesting discussion put forward by the authors is about rethinking alliances in a world becoming increasingly complex, multi and pluri-aligned. While Western theories about alliances, whether derived from realism [6] or liberalism [7], expect bloc homogeneity and uniformity of action, PICs offer us a different approach. By diversifying their security architecture, these states are not necessarily rejecting Western alliances, but are instead insulating themselves against the risks of a unipolar security reliance. This transition signifies a broader maturation of Pacific diplomacy, where sovereignty is defined by the capacity to navigate a competitive geopolitical landscape while prioritizing domestic stability and national interest above traditional regional hierarchies [8].

One of the book's valuable contributions is its emphasis on the agency of Pacific Island governments and societies. Contrary to the prevailing narrative that depicts PICs as passive recipients of Chinese economic statecraft, Yu and Sui argue that these states exercise a sophisticated form of sovereign agency. Despite their geographic scale and relative economic constraints, PICs demonstrate an astute capacity for asymmetric diplomacy. Rather than being mere pawns in a zero-sum game, these nations utilize big power competition to maximize their national interests and secure more favorable development outcomes. This strategic maneuvering is not merely opportunistic; it is a calculated response to a multipolar world. By engaging with Beijing, PICs effectively end the era of regional monopolization by traditional security providers. The big power competition grants small states significant bargaining power, allowing them to extract concessions, diversify their infrastructure financing and command greater international attention. In this context, the political wisdom mentioned by Yu and Sui refers to a state's ability to prevent any single hegemon from dictating its domestic or foreign policy.

However, there are some limitations and areas for further exploration. Firstly, the book's dominant focus on high-level political and economic dynamics means that it gives relatively less sustained attention to grassroots social perspectives and local environmental impacts. In the Pacific context, societies are deeply connected to land and sea environments, cultural heritage and community governance. Environmental and social considerations are particularly salient as Pacific states grapple with climate change vulnerabilities and potentially conflicting priorities between infrastructure development and ecosystem preservation. Greater attention to how BRI projects affect local land rights, ecological sustainability and social cohesion would have enriched the analysis. Secondly, the book could have explored this dimension more fully, particularly in light of real-world developments where China's role in Pacific policing, diplomacy and even maritime domain awareness is evolving. A deeper exploration of the security dynamics—how they intersect with economic and political engagement—would be valuable

for readers interested in broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Thirdly, the book offers analysis across multiple Pacific contexts, but the depth of case study engagement varies. Some relationships, particularly those with Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Samoa, where China has developed relatively close cooperative ties, would benefit from more sustained comparative analysis in order to better illustrate the nuances and variations in engagement strategies, implementation processes and outcomes across different Pacific Island contexts.

Despite some limitations, the book makes an important contribution to contemporary scholarship on the BRI and Pacific diplomacy. By focusing specifically on the intersection of geo-economic engagement and political strategy, it provides a nuanced window into how the world's most ambitious infrastructure diplomacy program is reshaping relations in a region long overshadowed by great-power influence. The book will appeal to academics in international relations, development studies, geopolitical strategy, and Pacific studies. It also holds utility for policymakers seeking grounded insights into how Chinese engagement operates in micro-regional contexts where traditional power asymmetries are increasingly contested.

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